



**Joseph P. Ward.** *Metropolitan Communities: Trade, Guilds, Identity, and Change in Early Modern London.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. xii + 203 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-2917-8.



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**Published on** H-Urban (December, 1997)

This impressively documented book is based primarily on manuscripts from fifteen archives and libraries, including sixteen companies whose records are in the Guildhall Library, London. The author, who is an Assistant Professor of History at Wayne State University, combines literature and printed documents in his general bibliography. Each chapter begins with a survey of recent interpretations, indicates clearly Ward's view, then documents his thesis with thorough and invariably engagingly presented examples from the archives. Ward discusses two meanings of community as they concerned the liveried companies (trade guilds), not always distinguishing between them clearly in his exposition. Recent historians such as Valerie Pearl and A. E. Beier, have seen a strong dichotomy between the City of London proper and the liberties and suburbs within the metropolitan area, which absorbed most of the immigrants—London's population at least quadrupled between 1500 and 1700—suffered more from disorder, and were havens for persons, including but not limited to immigrants, who hoped to escape the political and economic restrictions of the City. In this view the suburbs were thus more dynamic, and the unwillingness of the liveried companies to adapt to the changing demographics of metropolitan London contributed to their decline. Contemporaries complained that the companies failed to control the new residents.

Ward, by contrast, convincingly emphasizes the metropolis as a unit and downplays the contrast between city and suburbs. There was no longer a right of sanctuary, for officials of the City and the liberties cooperated to prosecute lawbreakers. Charity also crossed parish borders. In the 1640s Parliament had new fortifications built that linked the suburbs and liberties to the city and issued other statutes that applied to the entire metropolitan area. Ward finds that the liveried companies were much less restrictive and internally monolithic than has been thought, and also that their purview encompassed all of metropolitan London. They thus contributed to the development of a sense of community, in both an emotional and physical sense, among their members.

He groups the companies into retailers, manufacturers, and builders, each of which had a distinct role in and attitude toward expansion. As freemen, members of the companies could live anywhere under the lord mayor's jurisdiction, which meant the City; but by the mid-sixteenth century they could live outside the City for one year, or longer if the aldermen consented. The Vintners' Company charter of 1567 gave them rights of enforcement throughout the metropolis, and by 1641 more than half the taverns occupied by members of the company were outside the City. In 1607 James I gave the Grocers' Company the right to enforce its ordinances on per-

sons practicing the trade in the city, suburbs, and up to a three mile radius, whether they were free in the company or not. The brewers, weavers, coopers, and particularly the construction trade companies furnish even more obvious examples. Ward generally finds that the more oriented toward manufacturing the company was, the more likely it was to have a strong presence outside the City, which in turn may show a problem in treating the liveries companies as a group, given the diversity of types of activity that they represented. As residence patterns of freemen became more dispersed, the control of the companies over prices and wages and their rights to inspect workmanship, which could always be exercised over their members, received a significant growth outside the city.

Ward is less successful, in my opinion, in arguing that the liveried companies were coherent organizations that consciously fostered a sense of community among their members. He begins by noting the substantial literature on “community,” specifically Ferdinand Tönnies’ contrast between *Gemeinschaft*/community, which requires a significant degree of interaction among the members, and *Gesellschaft*/society, which does not. The two could co-exist, but *Gemeinschaft* was stronger in the Middle Ages, *Gesellschaft* in the modern period. Ward seconds recent scholars who have diminished the importance of locality; and, since communities can transcend place, it follows that there was less change than was once seen between the medieval and modern periods. Ward’s general conclusion is that “Perhaps the most important political division within companies was between those who cared deeply about their company and those who did not” (p. 145). Those who cared deeply found it a “community,” while those who “cared little about their guild’s ideals but remained affiliated with it for personal advancement” were a “society” (p. 146). In this view, the very fact that disagreements between company members were brought up in the company is a sign of community, notwithstanding that many such quarrels resulted in disorders and legal actions that involved the Crown, the City government, or both.

In fairness, however, Ward is careful even here to avoid monolithic interpretations of the companies, which were quite diverse among themselves. The Grocers’ Company, for example, was an umbrella organization of many commercial interests. The apothecaries were disputing the company’s authority over the drug trade, and in 1615 James I, over the grocers’ opposition, established an Apothecaries’ Company, which soon absorbed most of the apothecaries who had been grocers. Ward’s metic-

ulous combing of the company archives reveals fascinating information about internal politics, patronage, and faction-building within the companies. His discussion of internal politics within the companies is central to his thesis that they were reasonably harmonious working units that fostered a sense of community among their members, in some cases simply by agreeing to respect diversity. He disputes the classic notion that the courts of assistants were aristocratic and argues that much of the actual operation of the company was done by permanent employees, particularly the company clerks, who provided an element of continuity in relation to the rotating boards of wardens. He discusses at some length the problem of “decayed freemen,” who had fallen on hard times, and the makeshift wage jobs that their companies gave them, as well as company pensions and almshouses. One of his most intriguing expositions deals with questions of literacy and the use of written communication between the broad mass of freemen and the boards of assistants and wardens, which he sees as a sign of growing impersonality of relations.

On the example of the Grocers, Ward notes that the older companies, which had originated as medieval fraternities, still had ceremonial functions; but they were declining in the wake of evangelical Protestantism, and those members who objected to them were free to stay away from them without incurring company sanctions. Yet he finds no clear pattern in any company of reaction to the religious changes; for as the companies lost their religious foundation, this became less an area in which orientation would have a critical impact on one’s standing within the Company. He sees a general ethic of toleration developing in which continued respect for the Company was a bond of community. Dissidents could turn to other parallel communities—in the case of grocers, to the new Apothecaries’ Company, the East India Company in which many grocers invested, the parishes of All Hallows and St. Stephen’s that they patronized—for “meaningful association.” While the grocers kept their company cohesive by tolerating differences, despite the problem with the apothecaries, the weavers were very different: they were an industrial rather than a trade company, labor-intensive, and largely suburban rather than City. While most of the grocers’ problems were internal, the weavers had disagreements over admitting immigrants and technological innovation, areas in which some of the members felt that the governors were not enforcing the Company’s privileges satisfactorily, particularly against aliens.

The desire to see conscious or subconscious bonds

of community in everything from policy deliberations to serious discords causes Ward to engage in some social-scientific windmill-tilting, such as his proof of the fallaciousness of the “assumption that the City and the suburbs represented competing types of societies based on incompatible values” (p. 44). He prefaces his discussions of the grocers and weavers in the last two chapters, his most detailed examples, with a suggestion (p. 98) that what the governors of these companies were really trying to do was foster a sense of community among their members, not react to specific problems. Yet in these cases one gets the sense that he is paying obeisance to fashionable concepts, for in his chapter on “Communication and Company Politics” he gives an excellent discussion of the problem that freemen were claiming the right under the custom of London to practice any craft, whether the one in which they were trained and enrolled or not. This practice predictably led to shoddy workmanship, and the companies were as assiduous in enforcing their quality-control regulations against their own freemen as against outsiders. Ward notes (p. 56) that these examples should caution against the assumption—his notes do not

say who holds it—that all company members were honest and abided by regulations, while all outsiders were trying to deceive the companies by evading their regulations. This translates into a not surprising contrast of attitudes among freemen toward their callings: some respected their guilds, while others did not and used the companies as a cloak for deception.

The “community as emotional bond” aspect of Ward’s analytical framework is unobtrusive in most of the book. Some will be convinced by it. I was not, but I applaud this book as a work of thorough scholarship that provides a massive amount of hitherto unpublished information about the internal workings of the liveried companies and clearly documents the part that they played in extending the authority of the corporations of the City of London throughout the metropolitan area.

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**Citation:** David Nicholas. Review of Ward, Joseph P., *Metropolitan Communities: Trade, Guilds, Identity, and Change in Early Modern London*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. December, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1586>

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